

# Abundance, distribution and new records of scleractinian corals at Barrow Island and Southern Montebello Islands, Pilbara (Offshore) Bioregion

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The local abundance and distribution of scleractinian corals were documented near Barrow Island in the Pilbara (Offshore) Bioregion, Western Australia. Using a standard rapid ecological assessment method we recorded 204 species from 51 genera and as a result of this study we extend the known distribution range of 15 species. We find a high diversity of habitat types promotes high species richness, particularly among *Acropora* species. Our results confirm the existence of a unique suite of coral species in the Pilbara that is not recorded in the Oceanic Shoals (Offshore) or Pilbara (Nearshore) Bioregions. The Pilbara has a rich coral fauna that is often overlooked and the Barrow/Montebello Islands group may provide a high latitude refuge for some coral species including 39 species that are listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN red list of threatened species.

**KEYWORDS:** biodiversity, corals, demography, hermatypic, IUCN, local extinction.

## INTRODUCTION

The status of coral-reef ecosystems is closely related to the health, abundance and diversity of hermatypic (reef-building) scleractinian corals which engineer the structural framework of the reef, contribute to primary production and nutrient recycling, and provide microhabitat and food for a wide diversity of coral reef species (Done *et al.* 1996; Paulay 1997; Knowlton & Rohwer 2003). In order to effectively safeguard scleractinian (hard) corals, it is important to have baseline demographic data about the structure and composition of communities across multiple scales, because this enables changes to be detected, and helps community responses to impact or management action to be disentangled from natural stochastic processes (Willis & Birks 2006).

In Australia, the majority of coral demographic studies have been undertaken on the east coast (Babcock 1991; Hughes 1996; Connell *et al.* 1997; Hughes *et al.* 1999; DeVantier *et al.* 2006) and the demography of coral communities on the west coast of Australia is less well-documented. Nevertheless, reef systems are well-developed in Western Australia ranging from extensive high-latitude reefs (e.g. Houtman Abrolhos) to immense fringing reef systems (e.g. Ningaloo and the Kimberley) to offshore atolls (e.g. Scott and Seringapatam Reefs). The latitudinal extent of coral communities in Western Australia has expanded and contracted in response to climate change since the Pleistocene. It is predicted that coral species that currently occur in tropical locations will migrate south in response to future climate change and potentially persist in higher latitude 'temperature refugia' (Greenstein & Pandolfi 2008). Thus it is imperative that such potential refuges are identified and protected (Fabricius *et al.* 2007).

For species to migrate south from tropical locations in Western Australia it is necessary for them to pass through the Pilbara region. Currently, coral communities in the Pilbara region are relatively undisturbed due to a low level of urbanisation (DEC 2007). Initial investigations suggest the Pilbara region makes a significant contribution to Western Australia's coral biodiversity (Marsh 1997, 2000; Veron & Marsh 1988; Veron 1993; Blakeway & Radford 2004; Griffith 2004). However, there is a notable lack of quantitative information about the ecological structure of coral communities in this region. Existing studies from inshore locations suggest that the composition of coral communities varies considerably in response to wave exposure, natural turbidity and current movements (Semeniuk *et al.* 1982; Blakeway & Radford 2004). Where wave energy is high and there are low to moderate levels of turbidity, *Acropora* predominates. As the level of turbidity increases, the dominant community shifts towards other types of coral such as *Porites*, *Pavona* and *Faviidae*, and where turbidity is very high, *Turbinaria* predominates.

Here, we examine the biodiversity and local demographic patterns of scleractinian corals at 14 sites in the vicinity of Barrow Island, located in the Pilbara (Offshore) Bioregion on the North West Shelf of Australia. We report new biogeographic information and highlight the Pilbara as a significant centre of coral diversity at regional, national and international scales. Finally we discuss demographic patterns that are relevant to the effective management of coral biodiversity.

## METHODS

### Site description

Barrow Island lies ~1200 km north of Perth and 56 km from the coastline on the North West Shelf of Western

Australia (20.82°S, 115.39°E). Barrow Island is the largest of a group of islands (which includes the Montebello and Lowendal Islands) that are formed by a long shallow bank of Miocene limestone with Pleistocene carbonate reef deposits (Veron & Marsh 1988).

The Barrow, Montebello and Lowendal Islands occur within the Pilbara (Offshore) (PIO) Bioregion (IMCRA 2006). The PIO Bioregion occurs in waters seaward of 10 m depth contour between North West Cape and the Montebello Islands (Figure 1). The PIO Bioregion occurs offshore from the Pilbara (Nearshore) Bioregion, although it is not to be confused with the Oceanic Shoals (Offshore) Bioregion which occurs seaward of the North West Shelf.

Coral-reef ecosystems in the PIO Bioregion are considered unique due to the complexity of substrate types, oceanographic conditions and habitat diversity (IMCRA 1998; Brewer *et al.* 2007; DEC 2007). Tides in the Barrow Island region are semidiurnal, (two high tides and two low tides per day) and the tidal range varies significantly around the island with a maximum spring tide on the east coast over 4 m and <2.5 m on the west coast. Sea-surface temperatures in the area vary from 23°C to 29°C (Chevron Australia 2011) and there are frequent cyclones in the region (e.g. four tropical cyclones were recorded near Barrow Island during the 2010/2011 cyclone season).

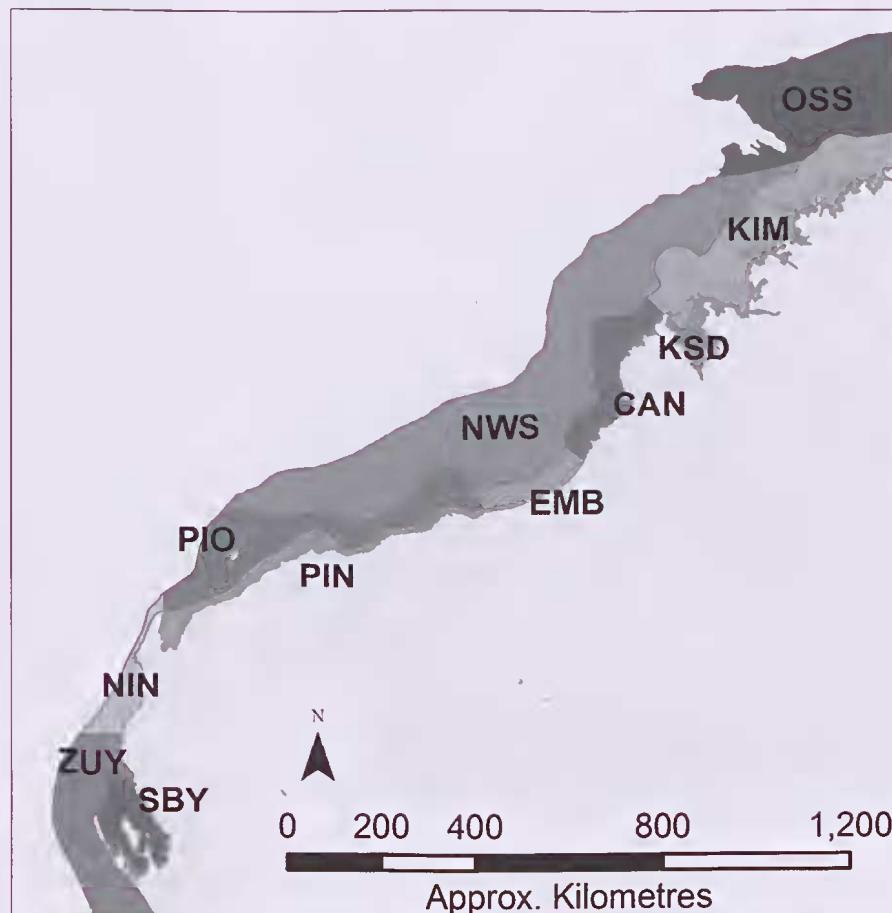
#### Survey design and analysis

Coral-biodiversity surveys were conducted at 14 sites in the vicinity of Barrow Island. Twelve sites were surveyed

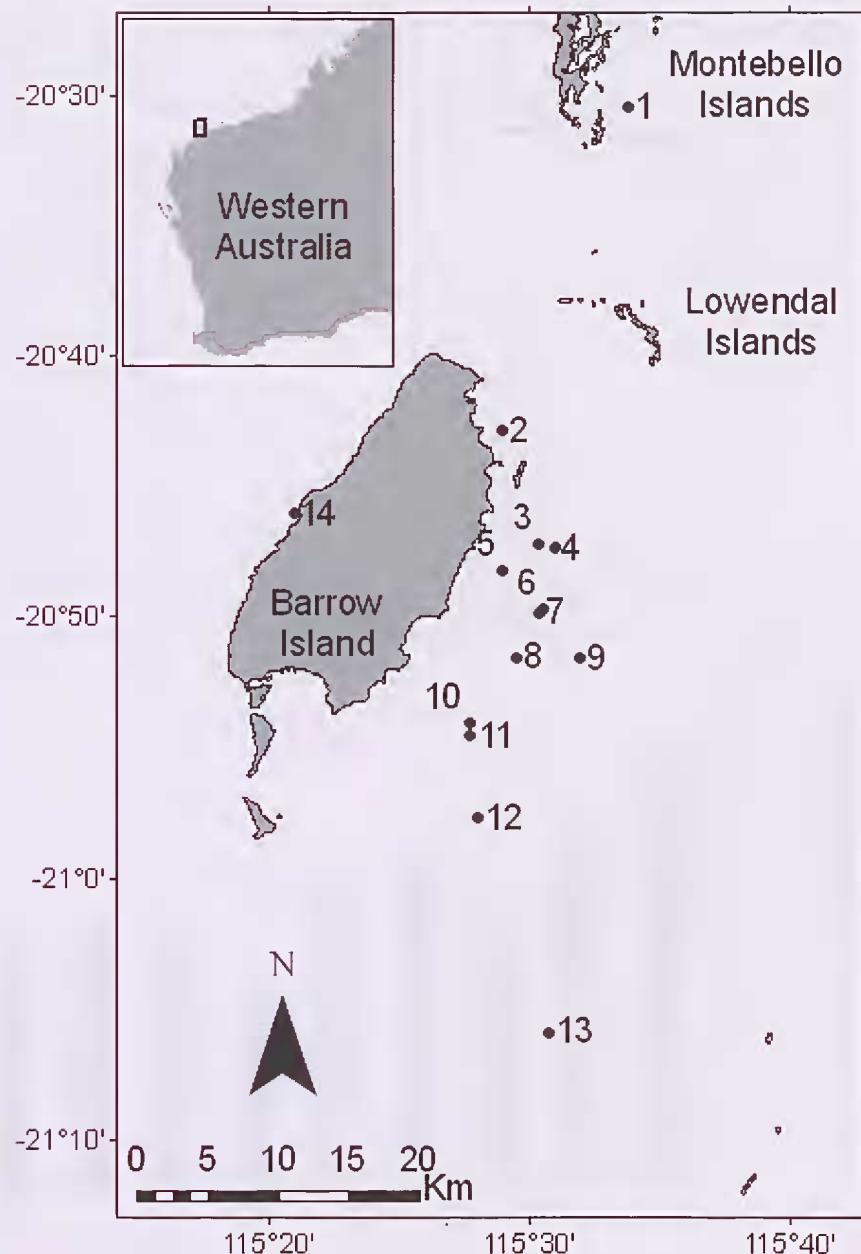
along a north-south gradient on the eastern side of Barrow Island, one protected back-reef habitat was surveyed on the western side of the island and one site was surveyed at the southern Montebello Islands (Figure 2; Appendix 1). A standard method of rapid ecological assessment (DeVantier *et al.* 1998; Kospartov *et al.* 2006) was undertaken by snorkel. Coral communities were documented to a maximum depth of 10 m, encompassing an area of ~150 m radius. At each site, surveys were conducted for 120 minutes, or until species saturation was reached (i.e. until no new species were recorded for a 15 minute period).

Species were identified *in situ* to species level wherever possible; otherwise a voucher specimen was collected for subsequent identification at the Museum of Tropical Queensland. Species names were interpreted according to Veron (2000) and Wallace (1999). One unidentified species has been designated as *Acropora arafura*, a new species recently described by Carden Wallace (Wallace *et al.* 2012).

The relative abundance of each species was ranked on a five-point scale adapted from a DAFOR scale which is commonly used in flora and fauna surveys and broadly analogous to a logarithmic scale: 1, rare (1, 2 colonies); 2, infrequent (3–5 colonies); 3, frequent (6–20 colonies); 4, common (21–50 colonies); 5, dominant (51+ colonies) (Jongman *et al.* 1995; DeVantier *et al.* 1998). These ordered variables have a relative magnitude interpretation, so a mean difference of 1 corresponds approximately to a log difference in abundance. When large stands were encountered, every 1 m<sup>2</sup> was treated as two colonies.



**Figure 1** Map of the bioregions in north Western Australia as delineated by IMCRA (1998). Bioregions are: OSS, Oceanic Shoals; KIM, Kimberley; NWS, North West Shelf; KSD, King Sound; CAN, Canning; EMB, Eighty Mile Beach; PIN, Pilbara (Nearshore); PIO, Pilbara (Offshore); NIN, Ningaloo; ZUY, Zuytdorp; SBY, Shark Bay.



**Figure 2** Map of study sites in the vicinity of Barrow/Montebello Islands that are located 56 km off the Pilbara coast on the North West Shelf of Western Australia.

Species accumulation curves were calculated for each location using the 'vegan' library in R using the function 'specaccum' with jack-knifed standard errors (Oksanen *et al.* 2009). This provided a graphical check of whether sampling was sufficient to detect rare members of the assemblage. The threatened status of coral species were downloaded from the IUCN Red List of threatened species ([www.iucnredlist.org](http://www.iucnredlist.org)).

## RESULTS

A total of 204 species from 51 genera of scleractinian corals was recorded (Tables 1, 2). We report here 15 new taxonomic records (Table 3), including five for Australia, five for Western Australia and five for the North West Shelf. The species accumulation curve approached an asymptote indicating this dataset provides a good representation of the coral diversity in shallow reef locations near Barrow Island (Figure 3), although

additional survey sites are likely to be needed to fully represent the wider diversity present in the PJO Bioregion because an additional 41 species recorded by Marsh (2000) from the Montebello Islands were not recorded in the present survey.

Site-specific species richness varied from a minimum of 50 species along the western side of Barrow Island to a maximum of 103 species at the southern Montebello Islands (Figure 4). The level of diversity along the eastern side of Barrow Island was relatively homogeneous but the proportional composition of different genera changed from *Acropora*-dominated communities in the north to *Porites*-dominated communities in the south.

Except for Site 14 on the west coast, characteristic fringing reef habitats such as reef flats and slopes were not immediately evident. Moreover survey sites consisted of isolated patch reef habitat with low-medium rugosity surrounded by soft-bottom inter-reefal habitat dominated by *Echinopora*, *Merulina* and *Pectinia*. Two sites (2 and 3)

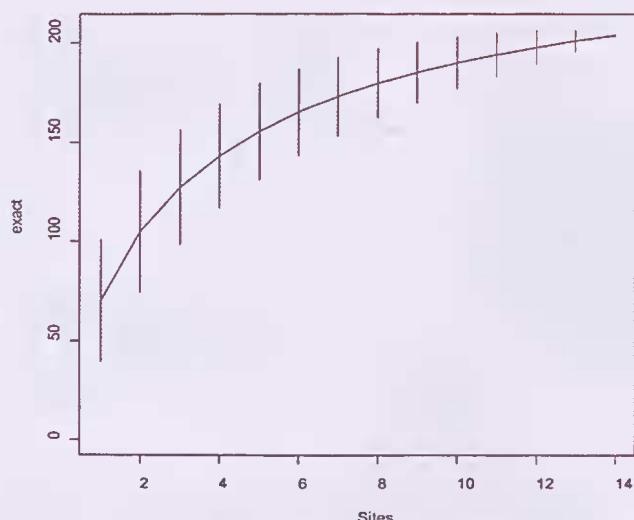


Figure 3 Species accumulation curve shows that this dataset is a good representation of the coral diversity in the vicinity of Barrow/Montebello Islands as the species accumulation curve approaches an asymptote.

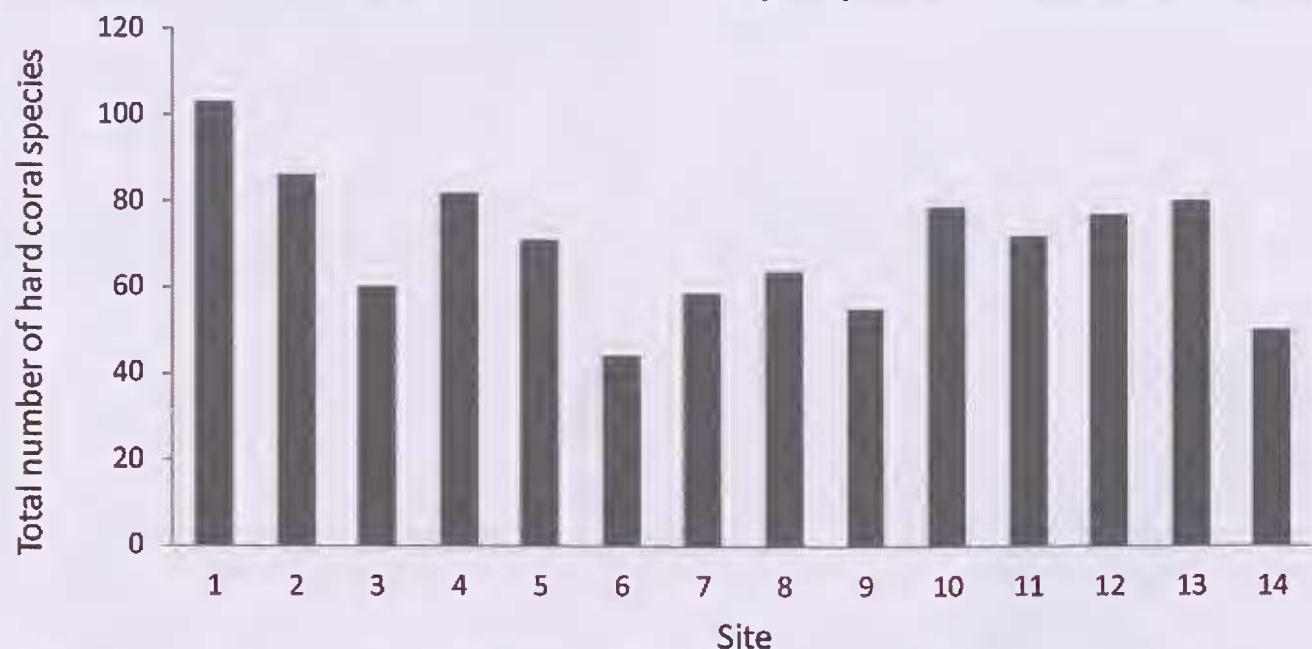


Figure 4 Species richness at the 14 survey sites in the vicinity of Barrow/Montebello Islands.

Table 1 Total number of hard coral species recorded in different regions of Western Australia.

Location	Lat/long	Species richness	Source
Ashmore Reef	12°15'S 123°02'E	275	Richards <i>et al.</i> 2009
Scott Reef	14°10'S 121°84'E	297	McKinney 2006
Bonaparte Archipelago	14°17'S 125°18'E	278	Z Richards, C Wallace, P Muir, J Veron, A Noreen, N Rosser & M Forde unpubl. data.
Rowley Shoals	17°20'S 119°20'E	188	Veron 2004
Dampier Archipelago	20°32'S 116°36'E	229	Griffith 2004
Montebello Islands	20°28'S 115°33'E	150	Marsh 2000
Barrow Island/South Montebello Island	20°82'S 115°39'E	204	This survey
Ningaloo Reef	22°40'S 113°39'E	217	Veron & Marsh 1988
Shark Bay	25°30'S 113°30'E	81	Veron 2004
Abrolhos Islands	28°43'S 113°47'E	192	Veron 2004
Geraldton	28°46'S 114°36'E	14	Veron 2004
Rottnest Island	32°00'S 115°31'E	19	Veron 2004

in the northeast of the island were dominated by corymbose *Acropora* and branching *Acropora* thickets. Of particular interest are sites on the southeast of the island where very large *Porites* colonies (>8 m greater diameter) were common. At these *Porites*-dominated sites, additional species (such as faviids, mussels and corymbose acroporids) colonised bare parts of the upper colony surfaces.

Of the 51 genera recorded, the most species-rich genera were *Acropora* (47 spp.), *Montipora* (19 spp.) and *Favia* (12 spp.) (Figure 5). The most abundant genera (in terms of the number of colonies) were *Acropora*, *Porites* and *Montipora*. Two species were recorded at all 14 sites (*Lobophyllia hemprichii* and *Pocillopora damicornis*); however they did not predominate at any site (Table 2). Species that were numerically dominant (i.e. over 51 colonies per site) and locally widespread (recorded at 10 or more sites) were *Porites lutea*, *Echinopora lamellosa*, *Merulina ampliata* and *Pectinia lactuca*. Four other species—*Porites australiensis*, *Acropora muricata*, *Acropora nasuta* and *Porites cylindrica*—were also locally widespread (present at 10 or more sites) and sometimes

**Table 2** The corals of Barrow Island/South Montebello Island with local pattern of occupancy denoted according to the number of sites occupied and the relative abundance at each site.

Species	No. of sites	Relative abundance	IUCN classification
<b>Family Acroporidae</b>			
<i>Acropora aculeus</i> (Dana 1846)	1	rare	Vu
<i>Acropora acuminata</i> (Verrill 1864)	3	rare to infrequent	Vu
<i>Acropora anthocercis</i> (Brook 1893)	1	rare	Vu
<i>Acropora australis</i> (Dana 1846)	8	rare to dominant	NT
<i>Acropora cerealis</i> (Dana 1846)	3	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Acropora arafura</i> (Wallace, Done & Muir 2012)	9	rare to infrequent	Not assessed
<i>Acropora cyathifera</i> (Dana 1846)	1	rare	LC
<i>Acropora digitifera</i> (Dana 1846)	3	rare to frequent	NT
<i>Acropora divaricata</i> (Dana 1846)	13	rare to frequent	NT
<i>Acropora donei</i> Veron & Wallace 1984	2	rare	Vu
<i>Acropora florida</i> (Dana 1846)	11	rare to frequent	NT
<i>Acropora gemmifera</i> (Brook 1892)	4	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Acropora glauca</i> (Brook 1893)	4	rare to infrequent	NT
<i>Acropora grandis</i> (Brook 1892)	4	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Acropora horrida</i> (Dana 1846)	1	rare	Vu
<i>Acropora huonii</i> (Dana 1846)	3	rare	NT
<i>Acropora hyacinthina</i> (Dana 1846)	5	rare to frequent	NT
<i>Acropora iusiguis</i> Nemenzo 1967	5	rare	DD
<i>Acropora intermedia</i> (Brook 1891)	6	rare to dominant	LC
<i>Acropora latistella</i> (Brook 1891)	4	rare	LC
<i>Acropora listeri</i> (Brook 1893)	1	rare	Vu
<i>Acropora loripes</i> (Brook 1892)	3	rare to infrequent	NT
<i>Acropora lowelli</i> Veron & Wallace 1984	3	rare	Vu
<i>Acropora litkenii</i> Crossland 1952	4	rare	NT
<i>Acropora microclados</i> (Ehrenberg 1834)	1	rare	Vu
<i>Acropora microplthalma</i> (Verrill 1859)	2	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Acropora millepora</i> (Ehrenberg 1834)	8	rare to common	NT
<i>Acropora muricata</i> (Linnaeus 1758)	11	rare to common	NT
<i>Acropora nasuta</i> (Dana 1846)	11	rare to common	NT
<i>Acropora palmata</i> Wells 1954	1	rare	Vu
<i>Acropora polystoma</i> (Brook 1891)	2	rare	Vu
<i>Acropora pulchra</i> (Brook 1891)	3	infrequent	LC
<i>Acropora robusta</i> (Dana 1846)	2	rare	LC
<i>Acropora samoensis</i> (Brook 1891)	10	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Acropora sargentosa</i> (Brook 1892)	1	rare	LC
<i>Acropora secale</i> (Studer 1878)	3	rare to infrequent	NT
<i>Acropora selago</i> (Studer 1878)	3	rare	NT
<i>Acropora solitaria</i> Veron & Wallace 1984	3	rare	Vu
<i>Acropora spicifera</i> (Dana 1846)	7	rare to frequent	Vu
<i>Acropora subulata</i> (Dana 1846)	3	rare	LC
<i>Acropora tenuis</i> (Dana 1846)	10	rare to frequent	NT
<i>Acropora valenciennesi</i> (Milne Edwards & Haime 1860)	6	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Acropora valida</i> (Dana 1846)	3	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Acropora verweyi</i> Veron & Wallace 1984	1	rare	Vu
<i>Acropora willisae</i> Veron & Wallace 1984	3	rare to infrequent	Vu
<i>Acropora youngei</i> Veron & Wallace 1984	1	rare	LC
<i>Astreopora gracilis</i> Bernard 1896	1	infrequent	LC
<i>Astreopora listeri</i> Bernard 1896	2	rare	LC
<i>Astreopora myriophthalma</i> (Lamarck 1816)	6	rare to frequent	LC
<i>Isopora brueggemannii</i> (Brook 1893)	4	rare to frequent	Vu
<i>Montipora aequituberculata</i> Bernard 1897	7	rare to frequent	LC
<i>Montipora crassituberculata</i> Bernard 1897	3	rare to infrequent	Vu
<i>Montipora danae</i> (Milne Edwards & Haime 1851)	4	rare	LC
<i>Montipora digitata</i> (Dana 1846)	3	rare to frequent	LC
<i>Montipora efflorescens</i> Bernard 1897	4	rare	NT
<i>Montipora foliosa</i> (Pallas 1766)	1	rare	NT
<i>Montipora grisea</i> Bernard 1897	2	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Montipora hispida</i> (Dana 1846)	8	rare to frequent	LC
<i>Montipora incrassata</i> (Dana 1846)	1	rare	NT
<i>Montipora informis</i> Bernard 1897	1	rare	LC
<i>Montipora mollis</i> Bernard 1897	2	rare	LC
<i>Montipora mouasteriata</i> (Forskål 1775)	2	rare	LC

Table 2 (cont.)

Species	No. of sites	Relative abundance	IUCN classification
<i>Montipora peltiformis</i> Bernard 1897	6	rare to infrequent	NT
<i>Montipora stellata</i> Bernard 1897	1	rare	LC
<i>Montipora tuberculosa</i> (Lamarck 1816)	6	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Montipora turgescens</i> Bernard 1897	5	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Montipora turtleensis</i> Veron & Wallace 1984	2	rare	Vu
<i>Montipora undata</i> Bernard 1897	6	rare to infrequent	NT
<i>Montipora verrucosa</i> (Lamarck 1816)	3	rare	LC
Family Agariciidae			
<i>Gardineroseris planulata</i> Dana 1846	1	frequent	LC
<i>Leptoseris explanata</i> Yabe & Sugiyama 1941	1	rare	LC
<i>Leptoseris myctoseroidea</i> Wells 1954	1	rare	LC
<i>Pachlyseris rugosa</i> (Lamarck 1801)	6	rare to infrequent	Vu
<i>Pachlyseris speciosa</i> (Dana 1846)	9	infrequent to common	LC
<i>Pavona clavus</i> (Dana 1846)	2	rare	LC
<i>Pavona decussata</i> (Dana 1846)	5	rare to infrequent	Vu
<i>Pavona duerdeni</i> Vaughan 1907	2	rare	LC
<i>Pavona explanulata</i> (Lamarck 1816)	2	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Pavona maldivensis</i> (Gardiner 1905)	1	rare	LC
<i>Pavona varians</i> Verrill 1864	2	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Pavona venosa</i> (Ehrenberg 1834)	1	rare	Vu
Family Dendrophylliidae			
<i>Turbinaria bifrons</i> Brüggemann 1877	2	rare	Vu
<i>Turbinaria mesenterina</i> (Lamarck 1816)	6	rare to frequent	Vu
<i>Turbintaria patula</i> (Dana 1846)	2	rare	Vu
<i>Turbinaria peltata</i> (Esper 1794)	2	rare	Vu
<i>Turbinaria reniformis</i> Bernard 1896	10	rare to frequent	Vu
Family Euphylliidae			
<i>Euphyllia aurora</i> Veron & Pichon 1979	2	rare	Vu
<i>Euphyllia glabrescens</i> (Chamisso & Eysenhardt 1821)	1	rare	NT
<i>Physoglyra lichtensteini</i> (Milne Edwards & Haime 1851)	2	rare	Vu
<i>Plerogyra sinuosa</i> (Dana, 1846)	3	rare	NT
Family Faviidae			
<i>Caulastrea curvata</i> Wijsmann-Best 1972	5	rare to frequent	Vu
<i>Cyphastrea chalcidium</i> (Forskål 1775)	5	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Cyphastrea microphthalma</i> (Lamarck 1816)	12	rare to frequent	LC
<i>Cyphastrea serailia</i> (Forskål 1775)	3	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Diploastrea heliopora</i> (Lamarck 1816)	5	rare to common	NT
<i>Ectiniopora ashmorensis</i> Veron 1990	4	rare to frequent	Vu
<i>Ectiniopora lamellosa</i> (Esper 1795)	12	rare to dominant	LC
<i>Favia favus</i> (Forskål 1775)	3	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Favia helianthoides</i> Wells 1954	3	rare	NT
<i>Favia laxa</i> (Kunzinger 1879)	2	rare	NT
<i>Favia maritima</i> (Nemenzo 1971)	2	rare	NT
<i>Favia mattlaii</i> Vaughan 1918	4	rare to infrequent	NT
<i>Favia maxima</i> Veron, Pichon & Wijsman-Best 1972	1	rare	NT
<i>Favia pallida</i> (Dana 1846)	11	rare to frequent	LC
<i>Favia rotumana</i> (Gardiner 1899)	4	rare	LC
<i>Favia rotundata</i> Veron, Pichon & Wijsman-Best 1972	8	rare	NT
<i>Favia speciosa</i> Dana 1846	8	rare to frequent	LC
<i>Favia stelligera</i> (Dana 1846)	4	rare to infrequent	NT
<i>Favia veroni</i> Moll & Borel-Best 1984	4	rare	NT
<i>Favites abdita</i> (Ellis & Solander 1786)	10	rare to infrequent	NT
<i>Favites acuticollis</i> (Ortmann 1889)	1	infrequent	NT
<i>Favites chinensis</i> (Verrill 1866)	3	rare	NT
<i>Favites complanata</i> (Ehrenberg 1834)	4	rare	NT
<i>Favites flexuosa</i> (Dana 1846)	2	rare	NT
<i>Favites halicora</i> (Ehrenberg 1834)	12	rare to frequent	NT
<i>Favites paraflexuosa</i> Veron 2000	1	rare	NT
<i>Favites pentagona</i> (Esper 1794)	5	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Favites russelli</i> (Wells 1954)	3	rare	NT
<i>Favites stylifera</i> (Yabe & Sugiyama 1937)	3	rare	NT
<i>Goniastreaaspera</i> Verrill 1905	3	rare to frequent	LC
<i>Goniastrea australensis</i> (Milne Edwards & Haime 1857)	9	rare to infrequent	LC

Species	No. of sites	Relative abundance	IUCN classification
<i>Goniastrea edwardsi</i> Chevalier 1971	3	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Goniastrea favulus</i> (Dana 1846)	3	rare to frequent	NT
<i>Goniastrea pectinata</i> (Ehrenberg 1834)	12	rare to frequent	LC
<i>Goniastrea retiformis</i> (Lamarck 1816)	9	rare to common	LC
<i>Leptastrea pruinosa</i> Crossland 1952	1	rare	LC
<i>Leptastrea purpurea</i> (Dana 1846)	5	rare	LC
<i>Leptastrea transversa</i> Klunzinger 1879	2	rare	LC
<i>Leptoria phrygia</i> (Ellis & Solander 1786)	5	rare to infrequent	NT
<i>Montastrea colemani</i> Veron 2000	2	rare	NT
<i>Montastrea curta</i> (Dana 1846)	9	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Montastrea salebrosa</i> (Nemenzo 1959)	1	rare	Vu
<i>Moseleya latistellata</i> Quelch 1884	2	rare	Vu
<i>Oulophyllia bennettae</i> (Veron & Pichon 1977)	3	rare	NT
<i>Oulophyllia crispa</i> (Lamarck 1816)	3	rare	NT
<i>Platygyra acuta</i> Veron 2000	9	rare	NT
<i>Platygyra daedalea</i> (Ellis & Solander 1786)	10	rare to frequent	LC
<i>Platygyra lamelliua</i> (Ehrenberg 1834)	8	rare to infrequent	NT
<i>Platygyra pini</i> Chevalier 1975	13	rare to frequent	LC
<i>Platygyra ryukyuensis</i> Yabe & Sugiyama 1936	5	rare to infrequent	NT
<i>Platygyra sinensis</i> (Milne Edwards & Haime 1849)	13	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Platygyra yaeyamaensis</i> Eguchi & Shirai 1977	1	rare	Vu
<i>Plesiastrea versipora</i> (Lamarck 1816)	3	rare	LC
<b>Family Fungiidae</b>			
<i>Fungia scriposa</i> Klunzinger 1879	1	infrequent	LC
<i>Fungia fungites</i> (Linnaeus 1758)	1	frequent	NT
<i>Fungia repanda</i> Dana 1846	9	rare to frequent	LC
<i>Halomitra pileus</i> (Linnaeus 1758)	1	rare	LC
<i>Herpolithia limax</i> (Houttuyn 1772)	8	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Lithophyllum undulatum</i> Rehberg 1892	9	rare to infrequent	NT
<i>Podabacia crustacea</i> (Pallas 1766)	8	rare to frequent	LC
<i>Polyphyllia talpua</i> (Lamarck 1801)	1	rare	
<b>Family Merulinidae</b>			
<i>Hydnophora exesa</i> (Pallas 1766)	11	rare to infrequent	NT
<i>Hydnophora grandis</i> Gardiner 1904	6	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Hydnophora microconos</i> (Lamarck 1816)	1	rare	NT
<i>Hydnophora pilosa</i> Veron 1985	9	rare to frequent	LC
<i>Hydnophora rigida</i> (Dana 1846)	5	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Merulium ampliata</i> (Ellis & Solander 1786)	12	rare to dominant	LC
<i>Merulium scabricula</i> Dana 1846	7	rare to frequent	LC
<i>Scaphophyllum cylindrica</i> Milne Edwards & Haime 1848	1	rare	LC
<b>Family Mussidae</b>			
<i>Acanthastrea declinata</i> (Dana 1846)	7	rare	LC
<i>Acanthastrea hemprichii</i> (Ehrenberg 1834)	2	rare	Vu
<i>Acanthastrea subecliptinata</i> Veron 2000	1	rare	NT
<i>Blastomussa merleti</i> Wells 1961	2	rare	LC
<i>Lobophyllum corymbosa</i> (Forskål 1775)	12	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Lobophyllum dininuta</i> Veron 1985	6	rare to frequent	Vu
<i>Lobophyllum flabelliformis</i> Veron 2000	2	rare	Vu
<i>Lobophyllum hemprichii</i> (Ehrenberg 1834)	14	rare to frequent	LC
<i>Lobophyllum robusta</i> Yabe & Sugiyama 1936	5	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Scolyntia australis</i> (Milne Edwards & Haime 1849)	1	rare	LC
<i>Sympyllum radians</i> Milne Edwards & Haime 1849	3	rare	LC
<i>Sympyllum recta</i> (Dana 1846)	5	rare	LC
<b>Family Oculinidae</b>			
<i>Galaxea astreata</i> (Lamarck 1816)	13	rare to frequent	Vu
<i>Galaxea fascicularis</i> (Linnaeus 1767)	10	rare to frequent	NT
<b>Family Pectiniidae</b>			
<i>Echinophyllia aspera</i> (Ellis & Solander 1788)	9	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Echinophyllia orphleensis</i> Veron & Pichon 1980	5	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Mycedium elephantotus</i> (Pallas 1766)	5	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Mycedium robokaki</i> Moll & Borel-Best 1984	1	rare	LC
<i>Oxypora glabra</i> Nemenzo 1959	7	rare to frequent	LC
<i>Oxypora lacera</i> Verrill 1864	11	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Pectinia lactuca</i> (Pallas 1766)	12	rare to dominant	Vu
<i>Pectinia paeonia</i> (Dana 1846)	6	rare to common	NT

Table 2 (cont.)

Species	No. of sites	Relative abundance	IUCN classification
<b>Family Pocilloporidae</b>			
<i>Pocillopora damicornis</i> (Linnaeus 1758)	14	rare to frequent	LC
<i>Pocillopora verrucosa</i> (Ellis & Solander 1786)	5	rare to infrequent	LC
<i>Seriatopora caliendrum</i> Ehrenberg 1834	7	rare to frequent	NT
<i>Stylophora pistillata</i> Esper 1797	6	rare to frequent	NT
<i>Stylophora subseriata</i> (Ehrenberg 1834)	1	rare	LC
<b>Family Poritidae</b>			
<i>Goniopora burgosi</i> Nemenzo 1955	1	rare	Vu
<i>Goniopora lobata</i> Milne Edwards & Haime 1860	8	rare to infrequent	NT
<i>Goniopora stokesi</i> Milne Edwards & Haime 1851	2	rare	NT
<i>Goniopora tenuidens</i> (Quelch 1886)	2	rare	LC
<i>Porites annae</i> Crossland 1952	10	rare to infrequent	NT
<i>Porites australiensis</i> Vaughan 1918	12	rare to common	LC
<i>Porites cylindrica</i> Dana 1846	10	infrequent to common	NT
<i>Porites lichen</i> Dana 1846	5	rare to frequent	LC
<i>Porites lutea</i> Milne Edwards & Haime 1851	13	infrequent to dominant	LC
<i>Porites nigrescens</i> Dana 1846	9	rare to frequent	Vu
<i>Porites rus</i> (Forskål 1775)	5	rare to frequent	LC
<i>Porites solidia</i> (Forskål 1775)	2	rare to infrequent	LC
<b>Family Siderasteridae</b>			
<i>Coscinaraea columnata</i> (Dana 1846)	4	rare	LC
<i>Psammocora contigua</i> (Esper 1797)	10	rare to frequent	NT
<i>Psammocora digitata</i> Milne Edwards & Haime 1851	5	rare	NT
<i>Psammocoranierstrasi</i> van der host 1921	1	rare	LC
<i>Psammocora obtusangula</i> (Lamarck 1816)	1	rare	NT

<sup>a</sup> The global threatened status of each species is noted according to IUCN categories and criteria: Vu, vulnerable; NT, near threatened; LC, least concern; DD, data deficient.

Table 3 New taxonomic records identified during these surveys.

Species	New record	Sites where species recorded
<i>Acanthastrea subechinata</i> Veron 2000	Australia	12
<i>Favites acuticollis</i> (Ortmann 1889)	Australia	14
<i>Platygyra acuta</i> Veron 2000	Australia	1,5,6,7,10,11,12,13,14
<i>Platygyra yaeyamaensis</i> Eguchi & Shirai 1977	Australia	1
<i>Stylophora subseriata</i> (Ehrenberg 1834)	Australia	1
<i>Acanthastrea hemprichii</i> (Ehrenberg 1834)	Western Australia	2,5
<i>Hydnophora grandis</i> Gardiner 1904	Western Australia	1,4,8,9,10,11
<i>Lobophyllia robusta</i> Yabe & Sugiyama 1936	Western Australia	4,5,10,11,13
<i>Montastrea colemani</i> Veron 2000	Western Australia	1,8
<i>Montastrea saebrosa</i> (Nemenzo 1959)	Western Australia	1
<i>Psammocora obtusangula</i> (Lamarck 1816)	North West Shelf	1
<i>Goniopora burgosi</i> Nemenzo 1955	North West Shelf	12
<i>Mycedium robokaki</i> Moll & Borel-Best 1984	North West Shelf	4
<i>Pavona duerdeni</i> Vaughan 1907	North West Shelf	10,11
<i>Scolymia australis</i> (Milne Edwards & Haime 1849)	North West Shelf	1

Table 4 Percentage of species in each abundance category

Abundance category	Percentage of species
Rare	44.1
Rare to infrequent	25.7
Rare to frequent	19.8
Rare to common	3.5
Rare to dominant	2.5
Infrequent	2.0
Infrequent to common	1.0
Frequent	1.0
Infrequent to dominant	0.5

common (between 21 and 50 colonies per site). Fifty-three percent of species were recorded as rare at the sites they occupied, while 32% of species were infrequent, 12% were frequent, 1.5% were common and only 1.2% were dominant (Table 4). Eighty-nine species were always recorded as rare and 35 of these rare species (17%) were recorded at a single site only (Table 2).

Coral genera that so far have not been recorded from the Barrow/Montebello Islands but are found on other reefs in Western Australia include *Anacropora*, *Stylocoeniella*, *Oulastrea*, *Caitharellus*, *Diaseris*, *Heliofungia*, *Sandolithia* and *Palauastrea*. However, it is important to



Figure 5 Number of species within each genus recorded in the present survey clearly shows *Acropora* and *Montipora* are the most species-rich genera followed by *Favia*, *Favites*, *Porites*, *Pavona* and *Platygyra*.

note that rare or cryptic species or those occurring beyond 10 m depth may not have been detected by our survey methodology. Thus, further surveys, particularly of the reef edge and reef slope habitats on the west coast of Barrow Island, may reveal additional species.

## DISCUSSION

This study is the first to record the relative abundance of corals in the PIO Bioregion in Western Australia and describes a community that, when compared with others in the region, has greater species diversity than currently recorded from the Pilbara (nearshore) Bioregion, but lower diversity than that recorded from the offshore atolls and Kimberley (Table 1). Importantly, this community contains 15 species that are not currently represented elsewhere in Western Australia, and in some cases, Australia (Table 3). A total of 204 species from 51 genera of scleractinian coral were recorded in this survey, and following Marsh (1997, 2000) raised the number of scleractinian species recorded from Barrow/Montebello Islands to 245. Thus, the coral communities of the PIO Bioregion make a significant contribution to Australia's biodiversity.

An important finding arising from the provision of abundance data in this study is that of the 204 species recorded in this survey, only eight species (4%) dominate the community (i.e. they were present at 10 or more sites with over 21 colonies counted at one or more sites: *Porites lutea*, *Echinopora lamellosa*, *Merulina ampliata*, *Pectinia lactuca*, *Porites australiensis*, *Acropora muricata*, *Acropora nasuta* and *Porites cylindrica*). Unfortunately few quantitative datasets exist to describe local patterns of species abundance in coral communities at other Pilbara locations, hence it is not currently possible to equivocally

comment about whether this particular suite of dominant species is unique to this location, or whether these species reach a similar abundance elsewhere. Nevertheless, it is likely that the Barrow/Montebello Islands are important centres of abundance for these species.

In a global context, one of these dominant species (*Pectinia lactuca*) is classified as Vulnerable to extinction this century according to IUCN categories and criteria (Carpenter *et al.* 2008), hence the Barrow/Montebello Islands may prove to be a globally important sanctuary for this species. Thirty-eight other members of the Barrow/Montebello Island assemblage are listed as Vulnerable by the IUCN (Table 2) including four of the species whose range has been extended to the PIO Bioregion (*Acanthastrea hemprichii*; *Platygyra yaeyamensis*; *Montastrea salebrosa* and *Goniopora burgosi*). Other species of interest in the Barrow/Montebello Island community that are classified as vulnerable by the IUCN are *Acropora spicifera* and *Echinopora ashmorensis* which, in Australia, are known only from the west coast. All five of the *Turbinaria* spp. documented at Barrow/Montebello Islands are classified as Vulnerable, which is somewhat surprising as *Turbinaria* are often described as a hardy species (Fabricius *et al.* 2007).

Our results suggest that almost half of the coral species in the vicinity of Barrow Island have very small population sizes. Eighty-nine species (44%) recorded in this survey were rare (i.e. only one or two colonies recorded per site) (Table 4) and 35 species (17%) were not only rare, but occurred at a single site only (Table 2). Considering the majority of species in ecological communities are rare (Magurran & Henderson 2003), and that some populations of rare species persist over evolutionary time in low numbers, at least partly because their small local populations minimise density-

dependant processes (e.g. disease outbreaks often occur among common species: Gaston 1994), it is not unusual to find a large number of rare species.

The suite of species recorded in this study suggests that there are marked cross-shelf differences in the composition of Pilbara communities. For example, at inshore sites near the Passage Island group (Onslow coastline), *Turbinaria*, *Favites*, *Platygyra*, *Goniopora* and *Lobophyllia* were the most abundant genera and there is very little representation of *Acropora* and *Pavona* (Z T Richards unpubl. data). At Barrow/Montebello Islands, the most abundant genera were *Acropora*, *Montipora* and *Porites*. These differences in community composition are most likely due to wave exposure and the level of suspended particulate matter in the water column (Marsh 1997; Blakeway & Radford 2005). While terrestrial run-off to the marine environment is generally low in the Pilbara region, input from rivers, and re-suspension of deposited sediments produces extremely turbid conditions in some areas (Margvelashvili *et al.* 2006). Given the dynamic and turbid conditions, it is apparent the many of the corals present in the Pilbara have adapted to a high sediment regime. Even though corals were traditionally thought to prefer clear water because light penetration benefits photosynthesis for their symbiotic dinoflagellates, new studies suggest that at high particle loads, corals gain energy by increasing their heterotrophic feeding (Anthony & Fabricius 2000). Hence, corals growing in the turbid areas of the Pilbara may offset the stress that accompanies high turbidity by changing their trophic mode, which sustains a positive energy balance in highly turbid conditions.

This survey adds many new species records to Western Australia, and highlights the fact that the Pilbara region has a rich coral fauna that is often overlooked. The diversity of habitats and isolated nature of many of the reefs around Barrow Island may provide a refuge for a number of coral species; however considering this community is dominated by only a small number of species with the majority of species occurring in low abundance, conservation plans for this region should be underpinned with quantitative data to accurately predict and protect species at risk.

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#### APPENDIX 1 GPS CO-ORDINATES AND DEPTH OF EACH OF THE 14 STUDY SITES.

Site	Latitude (S)	Longitude (E)	Approximate water depth (m)
1	20°30.472'	115°33.829'	6.5
2	20°42.898'	115°29.001'	4.0
3	20°47.229'	115°30.363'	3.0
4	20°47.350'	115°30.477'	5.0
5	20°48.249'	115°28.961'	6.0
6	20°49.713'	115°30.507'	9.0
7	20°49.867'	115°30.384'	8.8
8	20°51.575'	115°29.544'	6.5
9	20°51.624'	115°31.976'	9.3
10	20°54.085'	115°27.755'	6.3
11	20°54.949'	115°27.756'	2.5
12	20°57.717'	115°28.067'	3.5
13	21°5.929'	115°30.810'	4.8
14	20°46.068'	115°21.001'	1.5